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Steven E. Jones

Loyola University Chicago, stevenjones@usf.edu

Neil Fraistat

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The MOO as an Arcade: Minimalism and Interpretive literary Games

Steven Jones and Neil Fraistat
sjonesl@luc.edu; fraistat@mac.com

Abstract

Classic arcade videogames are engaging and immersive for counter-intuitive reasons, precisely because they are schematic and iconic, because they require a collaborative act of imagination on the part of the player; and because playing them is about being part of a shared arcade-based culture. As we have found in our own experiments in the Romantic Circles MOO, graphic minimalism forces us to maintain gameplay in a wider contextual setting. It's not just retro fashion that gives these games their continued appeal; it's that we are called on to make something of what is only sketchily suggested, and optimally we do so in a setting that is outside the frame of the screen, that widens to encompass the cabinet, the arcade (even if these features are only fictive constructs in today's emulation play), and other players. Any arcade is a social, RPG space, and the MOO at its best emulates features of the arcade as a setting.

In D. B. Weiss's recent comic novel, *Lucky Wander Boy*, classic video games from the early '80s arcade era -- Pac-Man, Donkey-Kong, Frogger, Mortal Kombat -- act as interpretive tv exts, giving meaning to the first-person narrator's sadly funny geek life, in part through his ongoing composition of a Borgesian *Catalogue of Obsolete Entertainments*. The old-school videogame arcade becomes in the novel a kind of utopian space, an alternate reality, a library of Babel, a realm of the imagination and the senses, and (for our narrator) of sympathetic magic. At a crucial juncture in the novel, the narrator, Adam Pennyman, tries to explain the historical shift toward realism and greater violence in games as marked by the samurai-fighter game, Double Dragon. He wants to make a case instead for the earlier low-tech games, and sees this shift toward realism as an unfortunate turning point, when games changed from being what Marshall McLuhan called a "cool" medium toward what he called a "hot" one. The cool medium, you'll recall, stands back and pulls you in; the hot one is in your face, keeps you at arm's length, a passive watcher rather than an immersed player. There are problems with this dichotomy (as with so much in McLuhan). But the argument in the novel makes sense on its own

terms, is internally coherent and persuasive, and the question of whether graphical realism is an immersive feature in games remains an important one. We quote, here, at some length:

... graphic minimalism goes hand-in-hand with the absorptive, World Unto itself quality that makes these games special, and indeed, a measure of this quality extends to all the Classic games, however basic in conception. When we play these games, the sketchy visual detail forces us to fill in the blanks, and in so doing we bind ourselves to the game world. Even more, we participate in its creation, we are a *linchpin*, a cocreator, crucial to the existence of the game world as it is meant to be experienced. (66)

Pennyman then goes on to cite a more recent theorist of new media, digital comic-book artist Scott McCloud, who observes that “The more cartoony a face is... the more people it could be said to describe.” Weiss’s narrator can never fully identify with the samurai-warrior avatar of the later game, he says, though that avatar was the harbinger of the future, of increasing cinematic realism, leading eventually to games with avatars who must be played by actual film stars, as in *Enter the Matrix*. Resisting this trend, the fictional Adam Pennyman remarks respectfully: “A Pac-Man, however” -- “is just a mouth. I have a mouth. You have a mouth. We all have a mouth.”

We need not follow Weiss’s hero all the way down his Neo-Platonic rabbit-hole in order to gain some practical insight from his argument in favor of graphic minimalism as a counterintuitive immersive aid—and against the cinematic fallacy and resulting “cinema envy” (Zimmerman). In a recent SLATE magazine column Clive Thompson argued that realism in games has become creepy and uncanny (in Freud’s sense), alienating. He said designers should be “going in the opposite direction and embracing low-rez simplicity” if they are interested in engaging the player.

We might think of this as the Namco imperative (which seems vindicated by the latest round of re-releases for Gameboy Advance as well as by a recent experiment at NYU with live-action real-world RPG Pacman, Pac-Manhattan, players running through the streets of Manhattan in spongy foam yellow and red and blue costumes). Classic video games are immersive for counter-intuitive reasons, ” from what is created by cinematically realistic games. Indeed, this is something like the literary immersion Coleridge referred to as “that willing suspension of disbelief,” and we

think the power minimalist immersion is especially useful to remember when it comes to experiments in literary interpretation in gamespaces.

Such are the experiments we have undertaken in the Romantic Circles WebMOO environment, the Villa Diodati MOO. The MOO, like Weiss's kind of graphic minimalism, is immersive in part because it *is* minimal. It's not that we are in touch with elemental forms when we play PacMan or encounter the MOO interface but that we are called on to make something of what is only sketchily, playfully suggested. The gameplay situation -- like the dice and text descriptions of Dungeons and Dragons, or like a dramatic script or the text of a poem, for that matter -- calls on us to *perform* immersion. The gameplay's the thing. And gameplay of this kind wants to be social. The minimalist games were in the 70s and early 80s part of greater complexities, including especially the social and (sub)cultural theatre of the arcade, row upon row of games flashing side by side, people playing alone or -- often -- in duos or groups, and moving among consoles and concessions, interacting within and across the various games played by others.

This is a useful metaphor for thinking of the MOO as a space for interpretive gaming. The MOO is primitive technology by today's standards, an open-source platform that retains artifacts of its roots in *Adventure* and *Zork* -- games even more venerable than Weiss's classics. These very limitations make the MOO an attractive platform for building collaborative interpretive spaces. The MOO provides an iconic virtual reality, less like distracting cinematic realism and more like a series of sequential comic book panels in its combination of text, image, and sketchy imaginative suggestion to create interpretive spaces that *must* be played out.

It helps to distinguish among different kinds of virtual-reality experiences, to contextualize the MOO in relation to installation art, for example, as we have done elsewhere. To cite just one case, in London during the summer of 2002 viewers could participate in Chris Hardman's *Euphorium*, an interactive virtual-reality theatrical interpretation of Coleridge's "Kubla Khan." Constructed as a gamelike maze with ten interlinked "environmental chambers," this installation allowed one person to enter every three minutes, wearing a special helmet that projected images in the space before their eyes, images representing portions of the poetic text. These images moved, combined, and reshaped themselves, accompanied by sound effects, in a kaleidoscopic multimedia experience meant to embody something of the poem's hallucinatory language but dialectically, via the technology of a physical and virtual environment. This installa-

tion is already an immersive game of sorts, providing the player with a medium through which to refract and interpret the poem by performing the work. Acts of literary interpretation could benefit from more of *this* kind of immersion -- an active, materially encoded, *technique*-embodied, kind associated with effective gameplay.

Historically, virtual-reality experiments have overlapped with artworld and theatrical installations as well as with electronic games. Michael Heim has investigated a similarly iconic immersive space, the surround-sound projective environment of the CAVE. Robert Coover and a group of creative writers at Brown University are already experimenting in this kind of space with immersive literary texts in a cave-like VR chamber. The MOO shares with these forms of virtual reality the potential to spatialize text. The hybrid WebMOO combines text and image, offering players a chance to imagine themselves as inhabiting the structure of a poem or novel. But the MOO also shares with Weiss' classic arcade games the playful, sketchy, iconic representational system, which invites, even requires, imaginative play. Better yet, the MOO is actually constructible, extensible by those very players, including the least technically adept among them.

Narrative, visual textuality, and immersion have coexisted in the gameworld from the beginning. Even the interface on Gameboy screens contains a layered array of representational modes, from scores, health points, and other numbers, to inventory icons of objects one is carrying, to text for dialogue or narration, along with animations of mazes, fight scenes, and the sprites and landscapes the uninitiated may mistakenly take as "the game." Or take the image-based gameworld of *MYST*, a collage of images and texts, movies and sound files. It was created in Apple's early Hypercard program and relied conceptually on then-emerging theories of hypertext to structure its navigable series of stills, which represented a cluster of worlds once created by a Prospero-like wizard and his magic books. The overall effect was conceptually close to early MUDs and MOOs -- with which *Myst* shared a great deal of *Adventure* DNA. The advantage of WebMOOs as interpretive spaces is that they retain the direct inheritance of text-based and collaboratively-built early games while simultaneously encouraging do-it-yourself multimedia experiments, the incorporation of images, animations, Quicktime and Flash movies, for example.

Digital environments -- because they are spatial and textual, procedural (or programmable) and capacious -- are inviting spaces for textual play, for literary interpretation. We agree with Jerome McGann and

Johanna Drucker that “Humanities scholarship without gameplay, even when the scholarship explicitly devotes itself to self-reflection, inevitably fails to engage with essential features of the works it means to study, including the workings of the mind engaged with such works.” In fact, one of the great virtues of environments like the MOO is their ability self-reflexively to model processes of textual reproduction and critical engagement, to foreground the act of “willing” and the provisional doubleness of “suspension” rather than merely the lack of “disbelief” in Coleridge’s famous romantic formula for poetic immersion.

We originally developed the MOOzymandias project to experiment with these self-reflexive features of digital gaming in an editorial and interpretive space. The result is a sandbox for building a textual edition of a literary work that, instead of appearing as a finished product, provides a collaborative, multiplayer, gamelike environment, a space where the players construct new content and reflect upon the processes through which that content is produced.

This is one reason we chose “Ozymandias” as our first experimental text in this medium, because it is already a complex textual engine of self-reflexivity. *MOOzymandias* is a labyrinthine tomb within which players are encouraged to use Shelley’s verbal text as building material to be arranged and reconstructed. Rooms and tunnels, once built, can then be inhabited and explored by other players. As in other games, programmable objects can be placed in the chambers for you to examine and, if you choose, collect, as you make your way through the text-space. MOO objects can be programmed by any user with the right character status, made to respond in various inventive ways and placed in each chamber where new players can encounter them, including, for example, easy-to-make bots that respond to questions with simulated conversation, and teleportation objects that take users to other places within the a network of primarily user-built tunnels and rooms, each of which contains other, thematic objects that explore not just the poem’s, but MOOzymandias’s own literary, cultural, or historical contexts.

As in any digital game, the player only learns what the different kinds of objects do by constructively trying them out. For example, you begin in the entryway (<http://www.rc.umd.edu:7000/705>) or antechamber where you encounter a “book (<http://www.rc.umd.edu:7000/2659>) that when “opened” (you have to type the command ‘open book’) moves your virtual character or avatar to an entirely new room (<http://www.rc.umd.edu:7000/748>). There the beginning of Shelley’s text

is revealed as writing on the wall, but a hidden keyword-object takes you down to a heretofore hidden series of linked tunnels (<http://www.rc.umd.edu:7000/2624>) running beneath the chambers. Anyone who has played adventure-genre games recognizes the interpretive protocols, here, and is on the lookout for other useful interactive objects. The MOO's multimedia effects include an ambient musical score and other audio files, to Quick-time VR and Flash movies. But the basis of the whole interface is malleable and morphing text, in itself an important interpretive premise. The overall result is a sense of inhabiting the verbal text of Shelley's sonnet while it is embedded in turn within a fungible series of other texts, objects, and spaces, suggestive of several complex overlapping contexts for interpretation. In this way Shelley's poem is at once historicized and materialized though the representational objects and spaces, all parts of a series of occasions for interpretive play.

All tunnels can ultimately be connected to the basic backbone-structure we have designed, and thus all tunnels *can* eventually wind their way to the final chamber, in which the Sphinxbot's questions about "Ozymandias" have to be answered before you can leave the tomb to emerge on the level sands of the desert above. Once in the desert (<http://www.rc.umd.edu:7000/765>), you get a full view of the text of Shelley's poem, shimmering like a mirage. Then you are permitted a dramatic endgame exit, through and beyond the text (by way of clicking through an interactive Flash-movie cut-scene). A hotair balloon carries you into the sky, to a birdseye perspective with a map and access to the MOO as a whole, including other gamespaces within the MOO, such as FrankenMOO and the Trail of Terror within that space, for example.

In a recent issue of the Electronic Book Review, Espen Aarseth rightly argues that games are not literary narratives, not "stories," but follow their own generic rules: "Games and stories," he says, "have distinct teleologies and artistic potentials, and it is analytically useful (for those of us genuinely interested in games as games, at least) to maintain a conceptual terminology that distinguishes between them." Fair enough. In a response, however, Stuart Moulthrop reminds us that games still require interpretation within larger social and cultural contexts. For us, the physical arcade is more than a metaphor; it is a reminder of these contexts - always in play in real gaming (even if one is sitting alone in front of a PC), and always in play in interpretive acts within gamelike environments, like those we are advocating. Moulthrop also says in his response that "the most promising forms of information play involve a shared encounter

with complex systems -- of the sort not found in first-person shooting galleries, even when multiple players are involved, but rather in MUDs and MOOs.”

MOOzymandias is only one model game in our Romantic Circles MOOspace. For us, the WebMOO environment is an open-source, accessible, relatively low-tech game platform that is inherently a networked, multiplayer, social space, on analogy with the arcade outside the frame of the console game. The MOO is open-ended and constructible. Players logged in from anywhere can create their own MOOzymandias objects -- perhaps in dialectical response to existing objects; they can even dig their own tunnels in the maze. The result is a process—a series of acts of collaborative (or competitive) literary interpretation within a network of participatory spaces that itself continues to mutate.

It should be clear that we’re as interested in the anthropology of the arcade as a social space -- which might open up to include the history of the midway and the amusement park, for example -- as we are in the technologies of the various games played there. Again, it helps us to think of the MOO as analogous not to the console but to the social space of the arcade, a space with an ever-changing array of games to play, moves and interpretations to perform. The lighting effects and decorated cabinets are in this analogy like the image and text furniture of MOO rooms, and the space is at its best when it’s packed with other players, all simultaneously immersed in their games and the larger, shared gamespace.

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(You must login to the MOO in order to play MOOzymandias in fully-interactive MOO mode (once in, type @go MOOzymandias), but we have provided hyperlinks in the text of this article to browsable Web-page versions of sample rooms, even though you will not be able to fully interact with all the MOO objects you find there. –SJ and NF.)
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